When is “On the Third Day”?

Iver Larsen · Notes on Translation No. 108 (August 1985):18-22 · This version slightly revised October 2026

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Introduction

In The Bible Translator (TBT 30 [3]: 340-343), Dr. David Clark pointed out how inconsistently all English versions and in particular the Today's English Version (TEV) treat the translation of the phrase “on the third day.” The purpose of this article is to expand on the topic of time reference in general and repeat the warning especially to mother-tongue translators not to adhere unthinkingly to the renderings found in the TEV or any other English version.

The meaning of “on the third day”

First we need to analyze the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek phrases which are literally rendered in English as “on the third day.” Or, in a more general sense, what does “on the x'th day” mean in the Bible? I shall not be quoting directly from Hebrew or Greek but shall quote from the more literal English versions. This will prove to be sufficient for our purposes as an understanding of those languages is not necessary to appreciate the point I shall make. The context is sufficient.

In our search for the meaning we shall look at the following examples:

1. LEV 23.15-16 “And you shall count from the morrow after the sabbath...seven full weeks...counting fifty days to the morrow after the seventh sabbath” (RSV). The context here makes it quite clear how counting of days was done inclusively. The seven full weeks are, of course, forty-nine days, but by counting both the starting day (the morrow after the sabbath) and the closing day (the morrow after the seventh sabbath) we reach the number fifty. This is also the reason why the day of Pentecost (meaning the fiftieth day) refers to a date forty-nine days after the day of the resurrection.

2. EXO 2.12-13 “...he slew the Egyptian....When he went out the second day...” (KJV). In this instance, “the second day” is correctly rendered “the next day” in most English translations. The same phrase in Jer. 41.4 is rendered “on the day after” in RSV.

3. LEV 19.6 “It shall be eaten the same day you offer it, or on the morrow; and anything left over until the third day shall be burned with fire.” (RSV) Within a single verse we have references to three consecutive dates: the day of the offering, the next day, and the next day

again. In English such references could be rendered: the day of the offering, the second day/the next day/the following day/one day later, and the third day/ two days later/two days after/after two days.

Dr. Clark pointed out in his article that “If it is felt that an expression of the form x days later or after x days is desirable, the only value of x that would convey the right meaning in English is two” (TBT 30[3]:342). The inclusive way of counting days in Hebrew culture is different from the noninclusive way of counting days in English. This is the crucial point we must realize if we want to understand the meaning of time references in the Bible.

4. EXO 19.10 “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow…and be ready for the third day” (RSV). In this case “the third day” points to two days after “today,” so it is correctly rendered as “the day after tomorrow” in TEV. This is possible in a direct quote where “today” refers to the day the words were spoken. But already in verse 16 we have the time reference in reported form: “on the third day” which translated into normal English is “two days later.”

The four examples above were from the Old Testament. In the New Testament we find two common expressions, either tritji hjmerai 'in/on/at the third day' or meta treis hjmeras 'after three days'. Dr. Clark has convincingly shown (Ibid., 341), that these two phrases refer to one and the same thing. In several parallel passages, Matthew and Luke use the first form, while Mark uses the second. I assume that the second was more natural in Greek, while the first may be a more literal rendering of the original Hebrew/Aramaic form. If we accept that these two phrases mean the same thing, then it is also clear from Old Testament texts mentioned above that the meaning of both is “two days later.” This interpretation is confirmed by the contexts in which those expressions are found in the NT.

Before we continue to discuss how to translate these expressions, let us briefly consider some of the places in the New Testament where the phrase occurs with a number other than three. Some examples follow:

1. Acts 10.30 “From four days until this hour” (literal Greek). It is clear from the context of verses 8 to 24 that the meaning is “Three days ago…” This is the translation chosen by TEV and Jerusalem Bible (JB), while most other English translations have “Four days ago…” The difference is again between inclusive and exclusive counting of days.

2. Luke 1.59 “On the eighth day” (RSV). With inclusive counting, “the eighth day” is exactly one week later or seven days later. So, if Jesus was born, say, on Tuesday, “the eighth day” would be the following Tuesday. Therefore, Living Bible (LB) is misleading English readers when they translate it as “when the baby was eight days old.” TEV chose the more vague rendering “a week old.”

3. John 20.26 “And after eight days again…” (KJV). The meaning is clearly the next Sunday, that is seven days later or one week later. Here LB, RSV and JB have “eight days later.” NEB, NIV and TEV have “a week later,” while Phillips has “just over a week later.”

4. Acts 24.1 “And after five days…” (KJV) Here the context gives us no clue whether this happened four or five days later. All English translations have “five days later” or the equivalent “after five days.” The meaning is probably “four days later,” but one could argue that Acts does not have the same Aramaic linguistic background as the gospels, and therefore the expression could mean five days later, assuming that the Greek language counts days exclusive as the English language does. However, this argument is weakened by Acts 10.30 above, where the context makes it quite clear that inclusive counting is used.

5. John 12.1 “Six days before Passover” (KJV). All English translations say “six days before.” This seems correct, since counting backwards is more complex. The context suggests that it refers to the Friday in the week before the following Thursday. The Greek expression here is different from the expression in Acts 10.30.

The translation of “on the third day”

The crucial question to ask is whether the target language uses inclusive or exclusive counting of days. It may well be inclusive as in Hebrew or it may be exclusive as in English. If it is inclusive, it is probable that a literal rendering like “on the x'th day” is the correct translation. If it is exclusive, the only correct translation in view of dynamic equivalence is something like “x-1 days later/before.” Dr. Clark accepted this as the correct solution for English, but rejected it as viable because of the conservatism of the prospected Christian readers. Instead, he says that a translation like “on the x'th day” is the “most accurate and clear English rendering” (Ibid., 342).

While I appreciate the need to consider the views of Christians who have become accustomed to the number three in this phrase, I cannot accept that it should be “clear and accurate.” In some linguistic contexts it is natural to talk about “on the third day.” This is when we have a specific period of days in mind and want to specify one particular day within that period. For instance, I can say (a) “On the third day of my holiday, I broke my leg.” This is equivalent in meaning to (b) “Two days after I started my holiday, I broke my leg.”

In sentence (a) the phrase “my holiday” is necessary to indicate that we are referring to a particular day within a period of days. There are other similar expressions, for example, “In the third year of my life” (When I was two years old); “In the sixth year of the king's reign.” In sentence (b) we are not referring to one particular day within a given period of days, but we are pointing to a day as a certain distance from a starting point. This is where the inclusive counting is used in Hebrew, but not in English. It is in these contexts that the phrase “on the third day” is both unclear and unnatural in English as well as being an inaccurate translation of the corresponding Hebrew and Greek phrases.

In my own language, Danish, we have the same problem with exclusive counting. I have tested the phrase “on the third day” in several church gatherings. Since it is unnatural, everyone will automatically try to interpret it to find the meaning they think fits best. The majority decided that it meant “three days later” (as The Living Bible in English did). A few said “two days later” because they connected the phrase with the time of the resurrection of Jesus in relation to the time of his death. Knowing that Jesus died on a Friday and rose on a Sunday, they calculated it to be “two days later.” However, the natural interpretation of the phrase is “three days later.” Testing a more neutral phrase like “on the fourth day” invariably resulted in the interpretation “four days later.”

Therefore, if we want a clear, natural and accurate translation into English (or Danish or other languages which count exclusively), the better option is something like “two days later/after” except in those contexts where the reference is to a particular day within a given period.

However, we also have the problem of symbolic meaning. The number three stands for divine intervention. This symbolic meaning is lost if we say “two days later”. So, even though “on the third day” is not clear and natural in English, it may still be preferable for the sake of tradition and the symbolic meaning. A footnote could then explain what is going on here. But we should not use “three days later.”

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